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Park System Planning

Park planning helps define which types of resource conditions, visitor experiences, and management actions will best achieve the mandate to preserve resources unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. National Park Service planning processes will flow from broad-scale general management planning, through progressively more specific strategic planning, implementation planning, and annual performance planning and reporting.



Public participation in planning and decision-making will ensure that the Park Service fully understands and considers the public's interests in the parks.

2.1 General Principles

2.1.1 Logical Decision-making

The National Park Service will use planning to bring logic, analysis, public involvement, and accountability into the decision-making process. Park planning and decision-making will be conducted as a continuous, dynamic cycle, from broad visions shared with the public to individual, annual work assignments and evaluations. Each park will be able to demonstrate to decision-makers, staff, and the public how decisions relate to one another in terms of a logical, trackable rationale.

2.1.2 Scientific, Technical, and Scholarly Analysis

Decisions regarding the treatment and use of park resources will utilize scientific, technical, and scholarly analysis. Analysis will be interdisciplinary and tiered, focusing first on the park as a whole (including its global, national, and regional contexts) and then on site-specific details. At key points of planning and decision-making, the Park Service will identify reasonable alternatives, and will analyze and compare their differences with respect to their consistency with the park purpose, the quality of visitor experiences, the impacts on park resources, short- and long-term costs, and environmental consequences that may extend beyond park boundaries.

2.1.3 Public Participation

Public participation in planning and decision-making will ensure that the Park Service fully understands and considers the public's interests in the parks, which are part of their national heritage, cultural traditions, and community surroundings. The Service will actively seek out and consult with existing and potential visitors, neighbors, people with traditional cultural ties to park lands, scientists and scholars, concessioners, cooperating associations, gateway communities, other partners, and government agencies. The Service will work cooperatively with others to improve the condition of parks; to enhance public service; and to integrate parks into sustainable ecological, cultural, and socioeconomic systems.

(See Public Involvement 2.3.1.6; Consultation 5.2.1)

2.1.4 Goal Orientation

Managers will be held accountable for identifying and accomplishing measurable long-term goals and annual goals as incremental steps leading toward fully carrying out the park mission. Such planning is a critical and essential part of the National Park Service performance management system that is designed to improve the Service's performance and results. Park staff will monitor resource conditions and visitor experiences, and plan, track, and report performance. If goals are not being met, management teams will seek to understand why, and take appropriate actions. The broadest goals will be periodically reassessed, taking into account new knowledge or previously unforeseen circumstances, and then the planning cycle will then be re-initiated at the appropriate point.

(See Park Management 1.4)

2.2 Major Elements of NPS Park Planning and Decision-making

A documented logical, trackable rationale for decisions will be created through several levels of planning, which are complementary, and become increasingly detailed. The process

will begin with determining why the park was established and what resource conditions and visitor experiences should exist there, and will then become increasingly focused on how resource conditions should be achieved. The planning framework for each park will contain the following elements:

- The park's mission, and the broad, park-wide mission goals. The park's mission includes the park's purpose and significance, based on the park's enabling legislation or Presidential proclamation, and any laws and Executive orders that apply to the national park system or to the individual park unit. Mission goals will articulate the ideals that the NPS will strive to achieve in the park. Park mission goals tier off, or flow from, the overall goals for the national park system.
- Specific management prescriptions in the park general management plan (GMP). Management prescriptions will (1) clearly define the desired natural and cultural resource conditions and visitor experiences to be achieved and maintained over time; and (2) identify the kinds and levels of management activities, visitor use, and development that are appropriate for maintaining the desired conditions. Management prescriptions will be applied parkwide by resource topic (such as prescriptions related to air quality, regardless of where it occurs in the park), and by specific geographic area as a management zone.
- Objective, measurable, long-term goals in the park strategic plan. The long-term goals will define the resource conditions and visitor experiences to be achieved in the near future, for which the superintendent will be accountable. These goals are based on an assessment of the park's natural and cultural resources; park visitors' experiences; and the park's performance capability, given available personnel, funding, and external factors.
- Implementation programs and implementation details in implementation plans (as appropriate). These will describe what actions are needed for achieving the mission and long-term goals, and specifically how they will be conducted.
- An annual performance plan, consisting of annual goals and an annual work plan that will guide park efforts for a fiscal year.
- An annual performance report, consisting of an accounting of annual results in relation to annual goals.

All of these elements will be interrelated in a single framework for planning and decision-making. Within this framework, actions will relate directly to goals, and goals will relate directly to the mission of the park. Annual goals and work plans will relate to long-term (five-year) goals, while long-term goals will relate to the park's mission, management prescriptions, and the broadest decisions about what the Service ultimately hopes to achieve.

Park superintendents and regional directors will be responsible for ensuring that planning is properly conducted within the foregoing planning framework, and for making management decisions supported by planning and analysis. However, many parks will initially lack some elements of a logical, trackable rationale as described here, and updating plans to bring them into conformance will take time. In the interim, management will be guided by the park strategic plan and other current approved plans. No major new development, or other major commitment of park land or other natural or cultural resources, will be authorized without an approved general management plan (GMP).

2.3 Levels of Park Planning

The elements necessary for a logical, trackable rationale for decision-making will be created and updated through four closely interrelated planning processes: (1) general management planning; (2) park strategic planning; (3) implementation planning; and (4) annual performance planning. The order of these processes will generally flow from broad-scale general management planning through progressively more specific strategic planning, implementation planning, and annual performance planning and reporting.

When determining a plan's scope, it will be important to distinguish which issues can most appropriately be addressed by general management planning, and which can be most appropriately addressed by more detailed strategic or implementation planning. Each level of planning has a distinctive function, and all levels are designed to interrelate with a minimum of duplication and confusion. At each level, plans will be written to make the linkages and relationships among the planning levels apparent to readers.

Environmental analysis of alternatives and public involvement required under section 102(C) of NEPA (42 USC 4332 (C)) will be conducted at any level of planning in which the decisions to be made constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Normally, NEPA analysis and public participation will be done at the general management planning level, when the overall direction for the park's future is decided, and again at the implementation planning level, before funding and resources are committed to carry out specific actions (see 2.3.1 and 2.3.4, below). In keeping with the Council on Environmental Quality guidelines for NEPA compliance, environmental analysis for more specific programs or actions will follow, or flow from, earlier NEPA documents for the broader GMP.

(Also see Director's Orders #2: Park Planning, and #12: Conservation Planning and Environmental Impact Analysis)

2.3.1 General Management Planning

The Service will maintain an up-to-date GMP for each unit of the national park system. The purpose of each GMP will be to ensure that the park has a clearly defined direction for resource preservation and visitor use. This basic foundation for decision-making will be developed by an interdisciplinary team, in consultation with relevant offices within the Service, other federal and state agencies, other interested parties, and the general public. The GMP will be based on full and proper utilization of scientific information related to existing and potential resource conditions, visitor experiences, environmental impacts, and relative costs of alternative courses of action.

General management planning will constitute the first phase of tiered planning and decision-making. It will focus on why the park was established, and what management prescriptions (i.e., resource conditions, visitor experiences, and appropriate types of management actions) should be achieved and maintained over time. The GMP will take the long view, which may project many years into the future, when dealing with the time frames of natural and cultural processes. The plan will consider the park in its full ecological, scenic, and cultural contexts as a unit of the national park system and as part of a surrounding

region. The GMP will also establish a common management direction for all park divisions and districts. This integration will help avoid inadvertently creating new problems in one area while attempting to solve problems in another.

(See Decision-making Requirements to Avoid Impairments 1.4.7)

2.3.1.1 Statutory Requirements

GMPs will meet all statutory requirements contained in 16 USC 1a-7(b), and will include:

- The types of management actions required for the preservation of park resources;
- The types and general intensities of development (including visitor circulation and transportation patterns, systems, and modes) associated with public enjoyment and use of the area, including general locations, timing of implementation, and anticipated costs;
- Visitor carrying capacities, and implementation commitments, for all areas of the park; and
- Potential modifications to the external boundaries of the park—if any—and the reasons for the proposed changes.

(See Visitor Carrying Capacity 8.2.1)

2.3.1.2 Decision-making Elements

Decision-making elements will consist of the mission, mission goals, and management prescriptions described previously in section 2.2.

2.3.1.3 Management Zoning

Each park's GMP will include a map that delineates zones or districts that correspond to management prescriptions. This delineation of management prescriptions is called management zoning. Most parks will have several different prescriptions for resource condition, visitor experience, and appropriate management activities to reflect the suitability of specific areas for those uses. For example, highly sensitive natural areas might tolerate little, if any, visitor use, while other areas may accommodate much higher levels of use. Even in historic structures, one floor might be most appropriate for exhibits, while another could accommodate offices or administrative uses. Some prescriptions may apply parkwide, but the delineation of management zones will illustrate where there are differences in intended resource conditions, visitor experience, and management activity.

2.3.1.4 Planning Team

An interdisciplinary team, including park managers and technical experts, will prepare GMPs. Planning teams will consult with park staff, Service leadership, other agencies with jurisdiction by virtue of law or expertise, other knowledgeable persons, and the public concerning future management of park resources. The planning team will advise the park superintendent and the regional director. The regional director is the official responsible for approving GMPs. Subsequent plans may be approved by the superintendent.

2.3.1.5 Science and Scholarship

Decisions documented in GMPs and other planning products, including environmental analysis and documentation, will be based on current scientific and scholarly understanding of park ecosystems and cultural contexts, and the socioeconomic

environment (both internal and external in relation to park boundaries). The collection and analysis of information about park resources will be a continuous process that will help ensure that decisions are consistent with park purposes.

(See Decision-making Requirements to Avoid Impairments 1.4.7; Planning for Natural Resource Management 4.1.1; Planning 5.2)

2.3.1.6 Public Involvement

Members of the public—including existing and potential visitors, park neighbors, people with traditional cultural ties to lands within the park, concessioners, cooperating associations, other partners, scientists and scholars, and other government agencies—will be encouraged to participate during the preparation of a GMP and the associated environmental analysis. Public involvement will meet NEPA and other federal requirements for identifying the scope of issues, for developing the range of alternatives considered in planning, for reviewing the analysis of potential impacts, and for disclosing the rationale for decisions about the park's future. The Service will use the public involvement process to share information about legal and policy mandates, the planning process, issues, and proposed management directions; learn about the values placed by other people and groups on the same resources and visitor experiences; and build support for implementing the plan among local interests, visitors, Congress, and others at the regional and national level.

While the NPS will encourage public involvement, FACA allows NPS staff to meet or consult with individuals and groups only for the purpose of exchanging views and information, and to solicit individual advice on proposed NPS actions. If consensus advice is sought, an advisory committee must first be chartered pursuant to FACA.

(See Consultation 5.2.1. Also see NPS Guide to the Federal Advisory Committee Act)

2.3.1.7 Alternative Futures

Alternative futures for the park will be explored and assessed during general management planning and environmental analysis. Within the broad parameters of the park mission and mission goals, various approaches to park resource preservation, use, and development may be possible, some of which may represent competing demands for the same resource base. The GMP will be the principal tool for resolving such issues. The range of alternatives will examine different combinations of management prescriptions, within the limits of laws, regulations, and policies governing national parks.

2.3.1.8 Environmental Analysis

The analysis of alternatives will meet the program standards for NPS implementation of NEPA and related legislation, including the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). An environmental impact statement (EIS) will be prepared for GMPs. In a few cases, the Environmental Quality Division, through the Associate Director for Natural Resource Stewardship and Science, may approve an exception to this general rule if completion of scoping demonstrates that there is no public controversy concerning potential environmental effects, and when the initial analysis of alternatives clearly indicates there is no potential for significant impact by any

alternative. Where NEPA and sections 106 and 110 of NHPA (16 USC 470f and 470h-2, respectively) both apply, NEPA procedures will be used to inform the public about undertakings having the potential to affect properties listed on, or eligible for listing on, the National Register of Historic Places, consistent with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's regulatory provisions governing coordination with NEPA, and the NPS nationwide programmatic agreement on section 106 compliance.

(See Evaluating Impacts on Natural Resources 4.1.3; Planning 5.2. Also see Director's Order #12: Conservation Planning and Environmental Impact Analysis)

2.3.1.9 Cooperative Planning

General management planning will be conducted as part of cooperative regional planning and ecosystem planning whenever possible. NPS participation in cooperative regional planning will be undertaken with the hope of better coordinating and focusing the independent and autonomous efforts of multiple parties. Service participation in such planning efforts will acknowledge the rights and interests of other landowners. While being consistent with NPS management policies and park goals, plans will identify and consider potential effects outside, as well as inside, park boundaries, and will identify ways to enhance beneficial effects and mitigate adverse effects.

2.3.1.10 Wild and Scenic Rivers

Potential national wild and scenic rivers will be considered in planning for the use and development of water and related land resources. The Service will compile a complete listing of all rivers and river segments in the national park system that it considers eligible for the national wild and scenic rivers system. GMPs and other plans potentially affecting river resources will propose no actions that could adversely affect the values that qualify a river for the national wild and scenic rivers system. A determination of eligibility will not necessarily mean that the Service will seek designation, which requires legislation. A decision concerning whether or not to seek designation will be made through a GMP, or an amendment to an existing GMP, and the legislative review process.

2.3.1.11 Alaska Park Units

GMPs for park system units in Alaska that were established or expanded by ANILCA will address the provisions for conservation and management planning specified in section 1301 of that act (16 USC 3191).

2.3.1.12 Periodic Review of GMPs

As necessary, GMPs will be reviewed and amended or revised, or a new plan will be prepared, to keep them current. GMP reviews may be needed every 10 to 15 years, or sooner if conditions change more rapidly. Even in parks with strong traditions and established patterns of use and development, managers will be responsible for assessing whether resources are threatened with impairment, the visitor experience has been degraded, or the park's built environment is difficult to sustain. Periodically reassessing the GMP will give everyone with a major stake in the park an opportunity to re-validate the park's role in the nation and in the region, and to re-evaluate whether the kinds of resource conditions and visitor experiences being pursued are the best possible mix for the future. An approved GMP may be amended or revised, rather than a new plan prepared, if condi-

tions and management prescriptions governing most of the area covered by the plan remain essentially unchanged from those present when the plan was originally approved. Amendments or revisions to an existing GMP will be accompanied by a supplemental environmental impact statement or other suitable NEPA analysis and public involvement.

(See Chapter 1: the Foundation; Chapter 3: Land Protection; Chapter 4: Natural Resource Management; Chapter 5: Cultural Resource Management; Chapter 6: Wilderness Preservation and Management; Chapter 8: Use of the Parks; Chapter 9: Park Facilities; Chapter 10: Commercial Visitor Services. Also see Director's Orders #2: Park Planning; and #12: Conservation Planning and Environmental Impact Analysis)

2.3.2 Strategic Planning

Strategic planning, required by GPRA, will be conducted for the National Park Service as a whole, and every park, program, and central office will have its own strategic plan. Parks, programs, and central offices will engage in strategic planning as a way to manage overall performance, and to thereby achieve better results in their mission of preserving resources and providing for visitor enjoyment. Through managing for performance, parks will identify their long-term goals, establish their annual performance targets, track their progress, and report their accomplishments toward meeting the Service-wide, and the park's, long-term goals.

A park's strategic plan will be based on the park's mission goals, GMP, and the Service-wide strategic plan. Strategic plans will address both Service-wide and local outcomes, and will be approved by the superintendent, with the regional director's concurrence.

2.3.2.1 Strategic Plan Contents

To fulfill the purposes of GPRA for implementing performance management in the National Park Service, strategic plans will contain the following elements:

- Mission statement;
- Mission goals (the same "anchoring" elements found in the GMP);
- Long-term goals;
- A short description of the strategies chosen to accomplish the goals;
- A description of how the annual goals will relate to the long-term goals (if it is not obvious);
- An identification of the key external factors that could significantly affect achievement of the goals;
- A description of the program/operation evaluations used in establishing or revising goals, with a schedule for future evaluations;
- A section listing the consultations with stakeholders and others; and
- A list of those who developed the plan.

Because information in park strategic plans is extracted for compilation within the Service-wide strategic plan, these plans must contain similar information.

2.3.2.2 Eight-step Performance Management Process

Performance management will be implemented according to the eight-step performance management process developed

by the Park Service. Analysis will focus on understanding the condition of the natural and cultural resources being managed; the experiences of visitors; and the capabilities of the park to perform, given the infrastructure, budget and staffing that can reasonably be expected during the planning period. Managers will consider how the park mission and long-term goals might be pursued in the foreseeable future. The answers to that question will determine the park's workload, budget, and staffing allocations for the next two to five years.

2.3.2.3 Relationship Between the Strategic Plan and the GMP

The park's strategic plan will be consistent with the GMP, building on the GMP mission, mission goals, and management prescriptions. Parks that lack a current GMP as a base for their GPRA strategic planning effort will work from their existing plans and an updated mission statement and mission goals. For GMPs that are not current, parks will identify and fill gaps in their overall planning framework as quickly as is feasible.

Although it shares some elements in common with a GMP, a park's strategic plan will not be a substitute for a GMP. A strategic plan is focused on a shorter time frame than a GMP; targets more measurable results; and does not usually require the comprehensive resource analysis, consultation, and compliance required for a GMP. Through strategic planning, park staffs will continuously re-evaluate the adequacy of the park's GMP as a foundation for addressing issues, and they may identify the need for a new or revised GMP.

Should a park decide, through its strategic planning process, that a major shift in direction or emphasis is needed, then the strategic plan will identify the need for a new GMP, or a GMP addendum or amendment. Strategic plans may also identify the need for more detailed implementation plans. General management planning and implementation planning are the appropriate processes for incorporating the requirements of NEPA and NHPA to consider impacts on the natural, cultural, and socioeconomic environments.

2.3.3 Implementation Planning

Implementation planning will focus on how to implement activities and projects needed to achieve the management prescriptions identified in the GMP and in the complementary long-term goals in the park strategic plan. Developing plans of action for dealing with complex, technical, and sometimes controversial issues often requires a level of detail and thorough analysis beyond that appropriate at the GMP or strategic plan levels. Implementation planning will provide this level of detail and analysis.

There are two elements of implementation plans that may be combined or addressed separately:

- Implementation programs will identify the scope, sequence, and mid-level cost estimates of projects needed to achieve park management prescriptions and long-term goals.
- Implementation details will concentrate on individual projects, and specify the techniques, disciplines, equipment, infrastructure, schedule, and funding necessary to accomplish outcomes targeted in the strategic plan.

2.3.3.1 Implementation Programs

Implementation programs for a park will provide a systemized course of action that can serve as a bridge between the broad direction provided in the GMP and decisions on impending actions provided in performance management. Implementation programs may include special emphasis plans, such as a park resource management plan, comprehensive interpretive plan, cultural landscape report, land protection plan, visitor use plan, or wilderness management plan. Integrated, interdisciplinary approaches to implementation programs will be encouraged.

2.3.3.2 Implementation Details

Implementation details may vary widely, and may direct a finite project (such as reintroducing an extirpated species or developing a trail) or a continuous activity (such as maintaining a historic structure or managing fire within a natural system). Examples of implementation details include management plans for specific species and habitats, site designs, off-road-vehicle management plans, and interpretive media plans. Implementation details will generally be deferred until the activity or project under consideration has attained sufficient priority to indicate that action will be taken within the next two to five years, and will then be included in an annual work plan. This will help ensure that decisions about how to best achieve a certain goal are relevant, timely, and based on current data.

2.3.3.3 Implementation Plan Development

Technical specialty teams under the direction of the program leader in the park (usually a division chief) or in the regional office will develop implementation plans, and the park superintendent will approve the plans. However, individual projects will be approved for implementation only in the performance management process, to ensure their integration with other park programs and initiatives.

Development of an implementation plan may overlap general management planning and performance management, if appropriate for the purposes of planning efficiency or public involvement. However, the decisions needed at the general management planning level and the strategic planning level will precede—and direct—more detailed decisions regarding projects and activities to accomplish goals. Major actions or commitments aimed at changing resource conditions or visitor use in a park, and major new development or rehabilitation, must be consistent with an approved GMP and be linked to long-term goals in a current strategic plan. Even if they are conducted simultaneously, the GMP and an implementation program will be contained in separate documents, or separate parts of a single document.

2.3.3.4 Environmental Analysis

Any decisions calling for actions having the potential to significantly affect the human environment will require a formal analysis of alternatives, in compliance with NEPA and related legislation, including NHPA. Because many issues involving environmental quality and cultural resources will be resolved through implementation planning, rather than general management planning, the NEPA and NHPA section 106 processes begun during general management planning will often be continued as part of implementation planning.

(See *Park Management 1.4; Chapter 3: Land Protection; Chapter 4: Natural Resource Management; Chapter 5: Cultural Resource Management; Chapter 6: Wilderness Preservation and Management; Chapter 8: Use of the Parks; Chapter 9: Park Facilities; Chapter 10: Commercial Visitor Services. Also see Director's Orders #2: Park Planning, and #12: Conservation Planning and Environmental Impact Analysis*)

2.3.4 Park Annual Performance Planning and Reporting

Each park will prepare annual performance plans articulating annual goals for each fiscal year, and annual performance reports describing the progress made in meeting the annual goals. The development of the annual performance plan and report will be synchronized with NPS budget development.

2.3.4.1 Annual Performance Plans

Annual performance plans will contain the following elements to aid in decision-making: (1) annual goals (the outcomes expected to be achieved that fiscal year) that are based on, and represent, one-year increments of a park's long-term goals; and (2) an annual work plan (inputs and outputs for the fiscal year) that breaks out park activities to achieve the annual goals, and that includes budget and staffing.

Annual performance plans have significant budgetary and personnel implications and need to be carefully prepared. Future-year annual performance plans will be developed in conjunction with budget requests (recurring and non-recurring), and are considered privileged information until the budget is made public by the President. Because they incorporate decisions made through other planning processes, annual plans do not require public involvement or consultation, but they must be made available to the public. The annual performance report will specifically address park performance as affected by budget change.

2.3.4.2 Annual Performance Reports

Annual performance reports will consist of two main parts: (1) a report on the progress made toward meeting the last fiscal year's annual performance plan; and (2) an analysis of the present fiscal year's annual performance plan. The analysis will identify the continuing goals (carry-overs) from the last fiscal year, and discuss why the park did not accomplish one or more of its annual goals in the past fiscal year and describe the steps being taken to accomplish such goals in the future.

The park annual performance report will relate to the Service-wide annual performance report, where applicable, in order to aggregate park results at the Service-wide level. The annual performance reporting is timed to provide Congress with information on past performance as it considers an agency's budget request and annual performance plan. Information from annual performance reports will also be used as the basis for personnel appraisals. Accountability for results should be within an employee's ability to effect results.